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SUBJECT: ARCHBISHOP TAKING STEPS ON INTER-FAITH TALKS,
CHURCH RE-ORG, AND TIP

REF: A. A) NICOSIA 75

[1](#)B. B) 06 NICOSIA 2055

[1](#)1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Recent Cyprus developments on inter-faith dialogue, Church re-organization, and the fight against trafficking in persons (TIP) dominated discussion at a March 22 meeting between Poloff and Archbishopric official Bishop Vasilios. In a pleasant surprise, new Archbishop Chrysostomos was displaying continued willingness, even initiative, in engaging the Turkish Cypriot religious leader, Vasilios thought. On Church politics, Chrysostomos was honoring November commitments that had brought him the throne, creating new bishoprics and freeing his flock "from outside interference." TIP, too, was winning the Church's attention, with Chrysostomos, as the Ambassador had urged in Ref B, soon to employ the bully pulpit to combat human trafficking on the island, Vasilios revealed. End summary.

On Archbishop Meeting the Mufti

[1](#)2. (SBU) Bishop Vasilios -- advisor to Archbishop Chrysostomos II and responsible for international and ecumenical relations of the Greek Orthodox Church of Cyprus -- followed up March 22 with PolOff on issues discussed first in January (Ref A). Vasilios voiced surprise at how "forward-leaning" the new Archbishop had been in reaching out to Turkish Cypriot Mufti Ahmet Yonluer, and confirmed that the religious leaders' February 21 meeting was positive and fruitful. The Archbishop had pushed for greater inter-faith dialogue upon assuming the throne in November 2006, Vasilios claimed, and regretted his missteps at a December press conference that led to Yonluer postponing their planned get-together. Their February meeting at Ledra Palace in the buffer zone, which visiting Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly (PACE) President Rene van der Linden had brokered, gave both sides the opportunity to try again for dialogue, Vasilios asserted.

[1](#)3. (SBU) Of the two religious leaders, Yonluer was in the more difficult position vis-a-vis inter-communal contacts, Vasilios opined. The Mufti continued to receive considerable criticism within the Turkish Cypriot community for meeting with the Archbishop and "going beyond" his local religious authority. Vasilios saw signs of resentment and distrust from everyday Turkish Cypriots to any gestures toward the Orthodox Church; Greek Cypriots, on the other hand, had reacted positively to Chrysostomos's T/C outreach.

¶4. (SBU) The Archbishop had a clear agenda going into the February 21 meeting, Vasilios explained: push Yonluer to allow the Church to restore long-neglected (and often ransacked) village churches and monasteries, and secure the return of priests to some of these sites in order to conduct regular services. The leaders did discuss the possible return of priests to St. Barnabas Monastery, Vasilios noted, in exchange for the permanent posting of an imam at the Hala Sultan Tekke mosque in Larnaca. Additionally, Yonluer promised a plan to protect the churches, but offered no specifics. Despite the Mufti's interest, Vasilios doubted quick action on the part of Turkish Cypriots, raising again their "resentment and distrust" that bound Yonluer's hands. Chrysostomos and his T/C religious counterpart would reunite soon, although no fixed date had been discussed.

¶5. (SBU) The Archbishop wants to meet soon with key ambassadors in Nicosia, including Ambassador Schlicher, Vasilios noted. Chrysostomos hoped to pitch a low-key lobbying campaign to convince Turkish Cypriot authorities to adopt a practical way to restore Greek Cypriot churches. "The Church is just interested in saving these holy sites," Vasilios stressed. Both sides' antiquities departments had frustrated pragmatic solutions and compromise, he lamented, without further elaboration.

A Truly Self-governing Church

¶6. (U) Inter-faith dialogue had taken a back seat to internal matters in recent days, Vasilios revealed, owing mainly to commitments the Archbishop had made during his campaign for the throne. In name "autocephalous," the Church of Cyprus had not been so since the Frankish occupation of the island

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in the 12th century, he contended. Every time the Holy Synod needed to make key decisions, most recently to remove the incapacitated Archbishop, Church leaders were forced to invite "outsiders" to meet the 13-bishop quorum. To correct this deficiency, Chrysostomos was directing a reorganization effort that had added six new metropolitans (bishops with geographic authority) and two assistant bishops to the ecclesiastical organization chart.

¶7. (SBU) Three of the six metropolitanates -- Famagusta, Karpasia, and Trimithus -- fall partially or entirely within the Turkish Cypriot-administered area. History, not secular politics, underpinned the decision to establish these particular jurisdictions, Vasilios argued. "Some existed as far back as 800 years ago," he explained, adding that the Church did not aim to provoke ill-will with Turkish Cypriots by creating "occupied" bishoprics. While too diplomatic to admit electioneering quid-pro-quo, Vasilios did not refute the widely-held suspicion that a fourth new district, Kykko/Tylliria, had come into existence solely as payback to Kykko Monastery's Bishop Nikiforos, whose votes helped elevate Chrysostomos to power in November.

A United Orthodox Front Against TIP

¶8. (U) Turning to TIP, Vasilios revealed that, after receiving the Embassy's January briefing, he raised the problem with the Archbishop. Chrysostomos had vowed to take action immediately. The primate began by appointing Father Isaiah -- a former International Visitors Program grantee now slated for Trimithus or Kykko -- as coordinator of the Church's anti-TIP efforts. The Church had already engaged the International Organization on Migration's Athens office for ideas on how it might combat the problem most effectively. The Archbishop intended to fold IOM input into an action plan, Vasilios noted. In addition, Father Isaiah

soon would accompany a Cypriot delegation, comprised of a judge, Interior Ministry and National Police officials, and NGO leaders, to a meeting with IOM officials in Athens. The session was part a European Public Law Center project that aimed to align 11 countries' trafficking regulations with the EU Acquis.

¶9. (SBU) Vasilios next raised an idea that had seized the Archbishop's imagination: an anti-TIP conference of all Orthodox churches to be hosted by the Church of Cyprus. Vasilios, who had become well-versed on the subject, noted that the conference would engage religious authorities in TIP source, transit and destination countries. Chrysostomos would use this platform to speak out on TIP for the first time, joined by his counterparts from Central, Southern and Eastern Europe. Church action against trafficking was an ethical imperative, Vasilios avowed, as the institution was the custodian of Cyprus' moral compass and protector of family values on the island. Vasilios was surprised, therefore, at mention that some GOC officials publicly shrugged off TIP's negative effects, and the need for government commitment to fight trafficking.

COMMENT

¶10. (SBU) Archbishop Chrysostomos has taken praiseworthy baby steps on matters that interest us, from inter-faith dialogue to TIP. Having toned down the anti-Turkish rhetoric that once brought him limelight, at times he appears almost progressive. Like a clever politician, however, Chrysostomos has avoided taking stances that expose him to real criticism or controversy. He will have to leave this comfort zone to effect real change in the aforementioned areas, however -- a move we aim to support.

SCHLICHER